

Fluid Population, Fixed Territory: Fantasizing a Non-solution to the US-China-Taiwan Status Quo

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Abstract

The US-China rivalry over Taiwan reveals the security issue's ontological nature. If Taiwan were to become an independent sovereign nation, no immediate change in the balance of global power need occur. However, it would destroy the regime legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party and strengthen the US' reputation as the protector of liberal democracy. Against this background of deadlock, the idea of singular sovereignty has been an obstacle to any solution. This essay aims to provoke consideration of a non-solution that targets the population's identity rather than the territory, where the Taiwanese population substitute two concurrent passports, one from the People's Republic of China and the other from the US, for its present Taiwan passport. This essay argues that under this paradigm, unification with China would cease to allude negatively to security and the US-China rivalry would turn into coexistence. The discussion has policy implications for disputes of territorial jurisdiction elsewhere.

Keywords: *US-China rivalry, Taiwan independence, China's unification, Sovereignty, ontological security.*

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1. Introduction

Two simultaneous topics have loomed increasingly popular among East Asian security watchers amidst and since Russia's war in Ukraine. One, a stream of discussion fills think tank reports in the Anglosphere, is when and how the People's Liberation Army will follow suit with a unification war against Taiwan, which could confront and end US dominance in East Asia (Klingner, 2022; Keegan & Churchman, 2022, 93-94; Faisal, 2022; Thompson, 2022: 3-4; Noboru, 2022; Analytica, 2022). The other stream of discussion, which has interested a huge number of Chinese bloggers, is how the White House can instigate Taiwan into an independence war with China to trap the state (O'Neil, 2022) into being the world's enemy as the war in Ukraine has made Russia (Sher, 2022).¹ Taiwan and Ukraine differ in terms of their culture, history, and geography, indicating that the imagined parallel draws upon realist international relations in terms of the small actors' need to take sides during hegemonic competition. On these topics, Taiwan's adamant pro-US and anti-China position ostensibly lacks relevance (Allison, 2022; CBS News, 2022; Pardo de Santayana, 2022). After all, Taiwan renounces a genuine choice for it sets aside plausible alternatives of bandwagoning China, hedging between the US and China, or posing neutrality. Note the shared assumption of all the speculations, conspiracy theories, choices, and plausible alternatives—Taiwan is a territorial identity, bounded yet vulnerable, for all sides to strategize to enforce each's claimed orders (Horton, 2022; Scobell & Stevenson-Yang, 2022).

The shared assumption reveals the ontological nature of the Taiwan security issue (Boyle, 2021; Chen & Shimizu, 2019). For Taiwan to officially become an independent, i.e., sovereign, nation, no immediate change in the balance of power would occur. However, it would destroy the regime legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party, which rests upon a national revivalist promise to cleanse all the imperialist and colonialist legacies from modern Chinese history (Hagstrom, 2021, 339; Chavoshi & Saeidabadi, 2021). This entails unification with Taiwan. Taiwan's independence would also strengthen the US' hegemonic leadership embedded in its reputation as the protector of liberal democracy and rules of international relations (Heritage & Lee, 2020: 207-210). Therefore, effective hegemonic order, in Graham Allison's terms (Allison, 2017), would rule out unification. Moreover, Taiwan's independence would affirm its proponents' quest for self-respect undergirded by a sense of civilizational superiority over China

(Chen-Dedman, 2022; Chen, 2020). Colonial modernity from Japan and neoliberal partnership with the US would enhance such self-respect (Rigger, 2021; Liu, 2021; Bunskoek, 2020: 232-6).

Against this background, which promises no way out (Heritage & Lee, 2020: 219-223; Zuo, 2018: 169; Zhang & Lebow, 2020; Glaser, 2015), this provocative essay impractically considers a solution, practically a non-solution, intended to prompt out-of-box thinking that does not take for granted sovereignty as the conceptual base to devise a settlement (Krickel-Choi, Chen & Bukh, 2022). Instead, the solution targets the population's identity instead of the territory and recognizes that the population is readily fluid (Shimizu, 2019). Specifically, the solution is for the Taiwanese population to substitute two concurrent passports, one from the People's Republic of China and the other from the United States, for its present Taiwan (i.e., the Republic of China) passport.

The essay is divided into two parts. The first part reviews how the literature is consistently tied to national sovereignty. The second part shows how a twin passport arrangement would transcend the sovereignty system, reconfigure ontological security, and turn Taiwan into a pluriversal, as opposed to territorial, identity. The conclusion will mention caveats.

2. The Sovereignty-locked Literature

The literature on the hegemonic transition makes the dominant international relations approach to the Taiwan issue (Chang-Liao & Chi Fang, 2021, Huang, 2019; Zuo, 2021; Pan, 2003). In this thread of literature, China is allegedly a revisionist state that seeks to overtake the United States (Hass, 2021; Pillsbury, 2015; Mearsheimer, 2014; Friedberg, 2011; Christensen, 2002). Two revisionist dimensions denote the hegemonic transition (Rolland, 2020; National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2017; Department of Défense, 2018). One is the all-around rising power of China to engage in world affairs and inflict damage to US influence. This dimension is geostrategic and manifests in China's omniscient investment in Africa, emerging networking in Latin America, and assertive stance in the South China Sea. The other is the potential of China's authoritarian model of governance to attract followers in the Global South (Greitens, 2020; Diamond & Schell, 2018). Given Taiwan's identity as a liberal democracy and how tremendously a unification with Taiwan would boost China's nationalism, the scholars alert to hegemonic transition cannot afford to leave territorial Taiwan's future alone.

The discussions on the inevitability of the hegemonic war often depict Taiwan as a potential point of an outbreak. If the narrative deems hegemonic war as escapable, the narrators' position on Taiwan is usually inarticulate and ambiguous (Haass, 2021; Rigger, 2021; Bush, 2016). On the contrary, in the narrative of an inevitable war, Taiwan would pose as strategic leverage (Lin, 2021; Hunzeker & Weng, 2020). The war in Ukraine even gives some analysts the impression that Taiwan could fight a vicarious war on behalf of the US (Seligman, 2022). The perspective of hegemonic competition thus focuses only on Taiwan as a strategic resource, regardless of the distinctive issue contexts of the two sites, that complicate and qualify their comparison. On the other hand, the Chinese scholarly opinion tends to refute the suggestions of inevitability (Wang, 2022; Wang, 2021). Almost no Chinese literature would convey an inevitability of unification as if unification and the continuation of peace between the US and China would have no contradiction. The implication is that any concession in exchange for US consent to unification is negotiable from the Chinese standpoint. The Chinese literature thus reproduces Taiwan as a fixed boundary. This is the same epistemological foundation for the US strategizing Taiwan in its China policy.

Another related thread of the literature attends to US national interests (Schell & Shirk, 2019; Stokes, 2017; Harding, 2015). The debate focuses on Taiwan's importance to the US' long-term interests. On one side of the debate, Taiwan fares insignificant, given that Taiwan represents China's vital interest but only a moderate one for the US (Mearsheimer, 2014; Gilly, 2010). According to this view, allowing Taiwan's independence to take priority over other US agendas makes little sense. The narrators in this stream of thought either believe in the renouncement of Taiwan as a US interest or conservatively consider the value of an indefinite medium term of the status quo, in which Taiwan does not officially declare independence and China does not push for unification (Lin & Zhou, 2018; Tuckre & Glaser, 2011: 35). Alongside is the suggestion of Finlandization as a possible approach for Taiwan to take in the face of a menacing China (Gilly, 2010). The unstated logic of these discussions is entirely territorial. Namely, under the circumstance that the US would not possibly own Taiwan strategically, the US could only yield Taiwan to China or keep Taiwan from China at most.

The other side of the debate takes an all-society approach to cope with the threat of Chinese revisionism, an increasingly favoured position in

the United States in the recent decade. The need to keep the US ahead of China makes allying with Taiwan more closely a temptation that cannot be resisted. This position treats Taiwan's remaining autonomous, if not officially independent, from China as a genuine strategic value (Wang, 2018). It calls for an overall strategy, with the support of the allies, to enhance Taiwan's international stance, including participation in international organizations, diplomatic recognition by a minimal number of states, security guarantees by the US and its allies, and legitimacy in replacing "Chinese Taipei" with "Taiwan" as its official label wherever enforceable (Lin, 2021).

The Taiwan studies literature is a third thread of the literature which is indirect but essential to reproducing sovereign sensibilities. This literature has had a long history. Its origin reflected a discursive renovation seeking to rescue USA's reputation in the aftermath of the Vietnam War. The renovation proceeded with the cooking up of four tigers—the newly industrialized countries of Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This was the first time Taiwan was a legitimate topic independent from China studies in the academic world (Shih, 2007). In addition to reducing Vietnam from its victory to a failing state, Taiwan provided ammunition for neoliberal colleagues to craft a rebuttal against the dependency theory, which blames underdevelopment in Latin America on world capitalism (Gold, 1986, 122-134). Samuel Huntington's publication of *The Third Wave* (Chu, 2012; Tien, 1996), together with Taiwan's political development in the early 1990s, promoted Taiwan as a model of democratization and a curious trajectory (Rubinstein, 2016). Internationally, the officially sanctioned research agenda of the strategic triangle boomed in the same decade to involve numerous Western and Taiwanese scholars to interrogate how Taiwan could fare in the US-China-Taiwan relations, further reinforcing Taiwan as a structurally equal identity in the academic world (Clark, 2011; DeLisle, 2010; Dittmer, 2005; Wu, 2005; Dickson, 2002; Carpenter, 2000).

After that, through grants from the semi-official Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation, the promotion of Taiwan studies in the West has been Taiwan's national endeavour and successfully established Taiwan studies as a brand-named discipline in comparative studies.² The topics are broad, but the theme and message are consistent and focused throughout. In short, Taiwan is a dynamic place where local practices testify to the voice, construction, innovation, and ambivalence of researched targets, the four terms that characterize Routledge's Taiwan series in 2022 (Fell, 2021; Hou, 2022; Fan,

2020; Huang, 2022). Together, they give rise to the varieties, possibilities, and reinventions of Taiwanese subjectivities. Taiwan can hardly be described in a nutshell, except that Taiwan is anything but Chinese. Such cultural sovereign consciousness is not directly territorial. As Cambridge University's *Taiwan Studies Series* states:

This book series presents a nuanced and close-to-the-ground analysis of Taiwan, a critical node in US-China-Japan competition in the Asia-Pacific region. It studies the island's social complexities and transitions from the geopolitical perspective while also focusing closely on its people's lives and cultural vibrancy.³

Even so, the resulting impossibility of calling Taiwan Chinese in this nascent literature continues to privilege territorial sovereignty peculiarly—Taiwan is by all means outside China's sovereign territory. The studies of Taiwanese business people and students in China are preoccupied with the findings that their identification with Taiwan remains resilient (Momesso & Lee, 2019; Lan & Wu, 2016; Tseng, 2015: 196-200). From the point of view of literature, Taiwan is full of agency for constant changes and differences to the extent that Taiwan is not a substantive label in itself while Taiwan is increasingly un-Chinese. Arguably, the determined quest for un-Chinese subjectivities necessitates the celebration of undecidability. Sovereignty is the discursive equivalent of subjectivities informed by undecidability qua un-Chineseness. The political implications are both China losing Taiwan as part of its territory and the US losing Taiwan if China would force unification.

3. An Exit from Sovereignty

Sovereignty is particularly unfit for the population in Taiwan as a representative institution or identity. To begin, sovereignty was the result of initially a bunch of European practices to transcend the City of God during the Religious War (Osiander, 2001). It presumably enabled the princes to choose their ways of being Christian. Sovereignty did not apply to colonies in the subsequent centennials until the decolonization after WWII. Despite that, the meanings of sovereignty have evolved and turned according to the practices of the Christian nations, such that becoming sovereign has always been a triumph for former colony states (Clapham, 1999), i.e., the Global South. Regimes in Taiwan, by all means, have likewise yearned for sovereign status regardless of which national identity they claim during their terms.

Still, the postcolonial conditions promise a Global South nation neither equality nor independence (Pourmokhtari, 2013). In practice, they turn sovereignty as a domain question into a people's question. Postcolonial nations cannot command the ready loyalty of their population, for their artificial borders cut across ethnic and religious identities to inflict domestic social and cross-border cleavages that disallow either the emergence of civil society or the planning of good governance. The entitlement to sovereign protection is an unattainable assumption. Sovereignty plagued by these cleavages fails to clarify who belongs or whom to exclude from within. In addition, migration between colonies and former colonizer communities further complicates the people's identification (De Genova, 2010) from a fixed population into a trans-population. From the sovereignty point of view, every Taiwanese person can be a suspect for insufficient normativity, a strategic balancer between the birthplace and homes in the US, China, Australia, Southeast Asia, and Europe, and a bridge between incongruent sites as an interpreter or buffer (Bunskoek, 2020).

The quest for sovereignty by the postcolonial Taiwanese regimes reflects, recreates, and reproduces colonially inflicted civilizational cleavages. All sides remain simultaneously embedded in different degrees of Chinese, American/Western, and Japanese relations. Taiwan's sovereign sensibilities are registered in several contradictions that suffer politicization and push for side-taking regarding belonging or not belonging to any particular sovereignty. At least four pairs of contradictions can be identified.

- (1) Taiwan's independent sovereignty denotes self-determination of the population for Taiwan's pro-independence regime but self-denial for the Chinese government.
- (2) It is defensive from the point of view of maintaining hegemonic order but offensive from the perspective of Chinese nationalism.
- (3) It is a statement of owning modernity for the people of Taiwan but a security concern from the US grand strategy point of view.
- (4) It connotes de-Sinicizing, as opposed to a return of colonial legacy, from Taiwan's internal cleavage point of view.

These four pairs of contradictions guarantee the implausibility of any settlement within the epistemological scope of sovereignty that stresses a single highest authority in the bounded borders. Not only the population

in Taiwan is divided, but the population is living across borders and experiencing an internal split whenever a sovereignty-induced interrogation is involved. Many Taiwanese families have second or third homes in China and the US. Some may conveniently invoke different stances at different sites on sovereign belonging (Tseng, 2015). None of these features make the Taiwanese distinctive from other people until the US-China rivalry compels them to choose sides. Before China could challenge the hegemonic order, the US was not alerted to the possibility of China's armed unification, and China could bear with Taiwan's autonomy short of an official pledge of independent sovereignty. In short, there used to be a non-solution through which China and Taiwan could bypass the sovereignty issue. The non-solution is no longer convincing in the 21st century, with the protection of one's sovereign status threatening the continuity of another's sovereign status (Mastro, 2021; Zhen, 2021).

The opposite to the current non-solution, which rests upon the power asymmetry of the US over China and China over Taiwan, could be another non-solution given the asymmetry of the US over China turning obscure in general and on the Taiwan issue in particular (Ling, Hwang & Chen, 2010). The following non-solution, impractical but illuminating, is to turn Taiwan's non-sovereignty into twin sovereignty. Consider that both China and the US issue passports automatically to any Taiwanese who choose to have both. All the strategic resources that the US might lose to China, including the frequently mentioned world's leading semi-conductor sectors, could remain in the hands of the Americans after Taiwan and China reunite. The Taiwanese claim to civilizational superiority due to institutional intimacy between Taiwan and the US would no longer need to be anti-Chinese. Taiwan would not need to declare independence from China with the population legally owning non-Chinese citizenship. However, China's quest for unification would also come true, not by territorial occupation and subjugation of the Taiwanese people, but by integrating the same-passport holders across the Taiwan Straits. However, interpretations about Taiwan's sovereign status might evolve, the Chinese would still own Taiwan's sovereignty.

As a bilingual person needs not declare her loyalty to only one of the two tongues while translating between the two language communities, a twin-passport Taiwanese could avoid the interrogation of her loyalty that would follow the convention of single sovereignty. An in-between

condition can be either a liability or an asset. First, the twin sovereignty makes a consensual value for different sides of the cleavage to ease mutual aversion caused by colonial and Civil War legacies. Second, without the need to settle on which sovereignty to claim, the US and China could resolve the hegemonic competition over the future of Taiwan. Third, once the anxiety toward the other side colluding with Taiwan to tilt the status quo subsides, the spiral of the security dilemma would lose momentum. In the last incidence, as long as unification is between the populations, it is not equivalent to the conquest of territory. The threat of revisionism would decrease. On the contrary, unification could breed a pluriversal order (Behr & Shani, 2022: 375).

Pluriversal international relations celebrate the coexistence of various relational configurations, that are informed not only by languages, religions, conventions, and the means of production but also, most significantly, by colonial networking. One rising agenda is the Global South, defined as the sites of colonization. A major feature of the Global South is the mingling of populations whose living necessities, social relationships, and political loyalty transcend borders, while being continuously regulated by multiple states. A vast number of migrants hold dual passports for the colonizer states and former colony states. Different states regulate and serve them in different ways, and they adapt to the contexts imbued with incompatible values, ways of life, and views of moral correctness. Pluriversalism describes the coexistence of these threads of relationality and their fluid representations. Individual lives and the capacities of the states are similarly constituted by pluriversalism, with only the former capable of strategizing such hybridity. The irony of “a fluid population, a fixed territory” indicates “realistic people, unrealistic states.” Such irony gives a clue regarding why the states will not adopt the twin-passport solution in practice and why its revelation among academics and think tanks can contribute to a critical reflection on the territorial fixation in the long term.

Even so, the twin-sovereignty non-solution would not be deemed entirely impractical if the relevant authorities could acknowledge that the situation of people holding two passports is already widespread anywhere in the world, including among Chinese citizens. Such an arrangement is not even unfamiliar at the group level as all the people of Northern Ireland are entitled to both the Irish and the British passports. The historical conditions of Northern Ireland are different in the sense that Taiwan has

been ethnically and culturally more Chinese than American, yet sought to become legally non-Chinese. In addition, Great Britain and Ireland are not rivals, as revisionism vs. anti-revisionism concerning the overall order. The international significance of the Northern Irish case is thus limited.

4. Conclusion

Conventionally, sovereignty defines territory, which defines the population. In contrast, the fantasy of twin sovereignty redefines the population, who redefine the territory. Note that singular sovereignty is the technical condition that allows the competition over the future of Taiwan to become an exercise in political correctness. Sovereignty has been an obstacle to any solution and an impulse of intense rivalry. A de-territorializing unification through fluid passport-bodies could be socially more genuine and deeper than an institutionally imposed symbolic name change because monitoring and disciplining any previously perceived incorrectness would become unnecessary for alarmists of either side. The topics of unification processes would cease alluding negatively to security. On the contrary, they would simultaneously facilitate the mingling of the US and China and turn a rival relationship into coexistence. An alternative could be a twin passport of China and Taiwan, instead of the US, that would request much fewer procedural arrangements and less emotional adjustment but might cause anxiety of loss among many an American Thucydides.

One caveat to make for the idea of twin sovereignty is that it could ironically cause a sense of simultaneous alienation from China and the US, the opposite of the present internal cleavage, as a Northern Irish person can be confused about her identity (Liston & Moreland, 2009, 127; Coakley, 2007). Another caveat would be the extended desire for third passports, such as the Japanese, the Australian, or the Canadian passport. Yet another caveat is the provocative effect twin sovereignty could have on the existing autonomous jurisdiction of minorities elsewhere to escalate the politics of identity. A general challenge to the sovereign system may ensue. What would these caveats lead to? A conversation between Professor Hirano Kenichiro and myself in 2005 is probably a proper ending. He asked me what would be an ideal substitute for the sovereign state. I incurred the metaphor of a maintenance garage that provides service to all brand automobiles—a metaphor for the fluid Global South population—but with a higher charge on other brands. He approved partially and questioned how a garage could

guarantee the security of its customers. He suggested that a prefectural system that keeps the police force would be his ideal substitute.

Notes

- ¹ More attention is given to the arrangements of encircling China from neighbouring countries and NATO involvement, in addition to Taiwan's street war capabilities. <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/05/04/the-real-lesson-of-the-war-in-ukraine-for-taiwan/>.
- ² Every call for application specifically states that "Projects on Taiwan Studies are especially encouraged." <http://www.cckf.org/en/programs>.
- ³ See <https://www.cambridge.org/core/series/taiwan-studies/03CFE4AE52D0E497ADDA27660C4C1B7A>.

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